

April 2, 2008
Section: News
Edition: METRO
Page: 1B

EMS using computer system

By Jessie Halladay

The Courier-Journal

Sometimes in the rush of getting patients cared for and to the hospital, paperwork filled out by Louisville Metro Emergency Medical Services staff ends up hard to read or lost in the shuffle.

This week, the department started using a \$2.1 million automated system in which all reports will be filed electronically.

All 75 of the city's ambulances, paramedic fly-cars and supervisory vehicles have been outfitted with computers that will produce medical reports, including EKG readings.

Dr. Neal Richmond, director of Metro EMS, said often what paramedics and emergency medical technicians do isn't fancy, such as checking a pulse or listening with a stethoscope. But "every once in awhile a new technology comes along that allows us to take our care to a new level," Richmond said.

As part of the technology, emergency personnel will be able to monitor trends to see if there is some larger outbreak of illness. For example, the system, named FirstWatch, would detect symptoms of illness, such as avian flu, and then alert officials to a possible outbreak. Louisville is the third large city to begin using the technology. San Francisco and Toronto already use the program.

"It really is going to take Louisville to the forefront," Richmond said yesterday in a press conference with Mayor Jerry Abramson.

After reports are filled out, they will be downloaded to an EMS server that saves the information for several years. That will enable emergency crews to have access to information about a patient who had been seen previously.

For now, reports will be printed when the emergency crew arrives at the hospital. But in the future, Richmond said crews will be able to wirelessly send the reports so that the hospital will have information prior to the patient's arrival.

Installing and maintaining the system is costing the city \$2.1 million. The equipment alone cost \$1.6 million. The money was provided in the capital budget through the city's last bond initiative, Abramson said.

With the improvements, city officials say that billing will be easier for hospitals, insurance companies and EMS. The agency averages about \$11.8 million in insurance reimbursements annually.

Maj. Joe Hamilton, a paramedic who is using the computer in the field, said it makes things much easier while dealing with a patient.

And Hamilton said he believes it will help provide better care for the patient because doctors at the hospital will be able to read reports and know a little sooner what's already been done.

"It helps me paint a better picture of what I've done for patient care," Hamilton said. "It's going to make it a more streamlined process for the doctor."

Reporter Jessie Halladay can be reached at (502) 582-4081.

Copyright (c) The Courier-Journal. All rights reserved. Reproduced with the permission of
Gannett Co., Inc. by NewsBank, inc.